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Spy Suspect Painted as Ruse-Loving 'Private Eye'

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NORFOLK, Va., May 27 — A portrait of an ostentatiously gadget-loving, politically ultra-conservative "private eye" who romanticized undercover assignments that often went awry is emerging here as associates of John A. Walker Jr. match their memories of him with the reality of his arrest on espionage charges.

The most prominent image here of Mr. Walker, a 47-year-old former Navy communications specialist, is as an electronics wizard who thought the world so full of despicable people that the victims of his investigatory subterfuge deserved whatever grief he brought upon them as a right-minded private detective.

The retired chief warrant officer, holder of highly classified Navy communications and cryptographic jobs at sea and ashore and of the Navy Commendation and Good Conduct Medals, is described by R. K. Puma, a former employee of his detective agency, as a self-deluded "James Bond who was really an Inspector Clouseau."

In part, a picture emerges of Mr. Walker as a kindly, if sometimes inept and secretive, man. Last year he was cited by WBEC-TV for contributing his time in the Norfolk-area campaign to find missing children. Some friends said he would have given them the shirt off his back.

Lawyer Cannot Comment

But there are also assertions by former co-workers that Mr. Walker lived in a "fantasy world" and could be thoughtless toward the subjects of his investigations.

Reached by telephone at the Federal public defender's office in Baltimore, where Mr. Walker has been held since his arrest May 20, his court-appointed defense counsel, Fred W. Bennett, would not comment on the characterizations of his client by associates here. "We are not allowed under local court rules to comment on the character or background or on the charges against a defendant," he said.

As to the allegations that Mr. Walker was a longtime spy for the Soviet Union, charges he has not responded to, many past and present associates here say they believe he is innocent, at least of sinister or treasonous intent. Almost all the acquaintances who agreed to inter-

views, on or off the record, said they believed that if Mr. Walker was proved guilty the explanation would be "excitement," "fantasy," "money" or, particularly among those who knew Mr. Walker's son, who is also charged with espionage, "insanity."

Mr. Walker formed his Virginia Beach detective agency, Confidential

Reports, in 1981, after 21 years in the Navy and a time working for a private security company.

Lonzo Thompson, a former Navy enlisted man, briefly worked part-time for Mr. Walker. He and other associates said that because Mr. Walker believed that most of his investigative subjects were lowlifes and criminals, he was "hooked on" using disguises, false pretenses, false identifications and elaborate "setups" to obtain evidence for his agency's clients.

"It was not good investigative practice," Mr. Thompson said, "but he really thought his operation was without a doubt the very best."

"He had contempt for the F.B.I and the Naval Investigative Service. He told me the N.I.S. couldn't find its way out of a paper bag. I'd like to ask him now how he feels about being bagged by them."

According to Lowell Thomas Tewell, who worked at the Walker detective agency for two months in 1984, Mr. Walker owned, and "in a sort of childlike way" was preoccupied with, an array of "a lot of very expensive, very fancy gear": telephoto cameras and electronic bugging devices, radios, binoculars and guns.

Neighbors Didn't Know Him

Mr. Walker owned and flew a small airplane and had two boats, two vans and a large Chrysler, and his house on Old Ocean View Road is the most imposing structure on a street of modest homes. But few neighbors there say they even knew his name.

"He was very aloof outside the private security industry," said Edward H. Ulrich, a retired Army major who met Mr. Walker when they both worked for the Norfolk office of the Wackenhut Corporation, a large industrial security firm. Mr. Ulrich later became a part-time Walker investigator.

"Among his own people, his employees, he liked to impress everyone," Mr. Ulrich said. "He loved the role-playing. It was part of his mystique."

A Bird-Watcher Pose

Turning his initials into a code name, friends said, for years Mr. Walker signed routine office papers — and the Government now alleges, espionage materials — as "Jaws." In 1983, displaying for an interviewer from Commonwealth Magazine an array of electronic gadgetry, Mr. Walker himself described his job as "damn glamorous work."

As an experienced investigator who was aware of the cost of equipment, Mr. Tewell said that when he went to work for Mr. Walker he wondered where the money to pay for it came from. The Walker agency did not seem to have enough investigative

work to support it in its "glamorous" fashion, Mr. Tewell said.

Mr. Walker's resort to investigative ruses in which he could deploy his costly equipment was "a game to him and he was totally wrapped up in it," Mr. Ulrich said. Mr. Walker is reported to have disguised himself at various times as a Boy Scout leader, a priest, a hobo and a bird-watcher seeking photographs of fauna.

But occasionally what these backfired, usually with little serious consequence.

"There was a guy he was tailing who he knew was claiming he had some injury to his ears on the job," Mr. Thompson recalled. "His setup for this guy was to notify him falsely that he had 'won a prize' of tickets to a particular event at a night club with a really noisy band."

Mr. Walker "was waiting outside in his van with his hidden cameras," Mr. Thompson recalled. "But when the car got to the club, the man's wife came out of it instead."

Frederick Talbott, who teaches journalism at Old Dominion University here, was a reporter for The Norfolk Ledger-Star in 1981 when he was investigating home improvement contractors. He said a woman he had interviewed called to say that "a reporter from The Christian Science Monitor" wanted to come and see — and to take away and photocopy — the contract she had signed with the home repair company.

She was suing the repair company for fraud, and "the contract was her whole evidence," Mr. Talbott said. He became suspicious and The Ledger-Star sent him to lie in wait.

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'He Showed No Concern'

When Mr. Walker acknowledged that he was really a detective, working for the contractor who was being sued, he became very nervous, according to Mr. Talbott. "What appalled me," he said, "was that even then, when he admitted abusing this helpless woman, he showed no concern at all for having frightened her and very nearly cheating her."

Although the police were summoned, Mr. Talbott said no complaint was filed. And The Ledger-Star did not publish an article about the incident. "My best recollection is that I felt that story was focused much too much on us," said Sandy Rowe, the executive editor of The Ledger-Star. "I didn't think then that it was of great importance to our readers."

Two years later, in 1983, another of Mr. Walker's "setups" led to a formal reprimand from the Virginia Department of Commerce, which licenses private detectives in the state.

To entice a man in a divorce case into a compromising situation, according to the records, Mr. Walker notified the subject that he had won a

"prize" of dinner and hotel accommodations.

The ruse failed to produce the evidence Mr. Walker sought, and it led to trouble when the estranged wife paid the detective with a joint credit card and the husband got the \$469 bill.

The bill Mr. Walker sent was not from Mr. Walker's licensed detective agency, according to Bartara Woodson, a spokesman for the Commerce Department, but from an unlicensed concern.

Mr. Tewell, who now runs an investigative office of his own, said Mr. Walker was paying a part-time staff \$5 to \$6 an hour to work on intermittent cases, largely checking the validity of worker's compensation claims — as in the case of the man with the tender ears. "There wasn't much work," Mr. Tewell said, "and when the big Navy ships came in he would hire a lot of Navy people at even cheaper wages."

Mr. Tewell, who did not know of the state's 1983 warning, said he left because he felt Mr. Walker "had no respect for the profession of private investigation."

Militantly Patriotic

Mr. Walker's political and ideological views were perceived by associates to whom he revealed them as firmly, even militantly, patriotic and conservative. "Johnny's public attitude was one of 'kill a Commie for Mommie,'" said Mr. Ulrich.

Lonzo Thompson, who is black, said Mr. Walker never said anything within his earshot "that seemed directly racist," but he "wondered" about his racial attitudes. He thought "everyone was part of really bad group instead of good or bad as an individual," Mr. Thompson said.

Mr. Ulrich said the detective always spoke of the Soviet Union with contempt, if not hatred. "He certainly did not seem a person who would ever cut down America," Mr. Ulrich said. So if Mr. Walker is guilty of spying, he said, he suspects it is based on a "James Bond mystique."

In Mr. Walker's only public remarks since his arrest, in a telephone call he made to The Virginian-Pilot last Wednesday in response to a telegram sent by the newspaper to the Baltimore city jail, he described himself as "a celebrity."

"Things are going good," he said.